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ABSTRACT

The best reporting procedure for any school or school district can be determined only after careful study of the needs and philosophy of the educational program. Whatever the choice of evaluation process, it should be focused on the individual rather than on a group, be skill- or criterion-based, be adaptable on a multi-grade-level range, be reasonable rather than rigid in time requirements, identify skill proficiencies, identify the student's skill deficiencies, identify the student's skill position, and be flexible enough to provide social, behavioral, and personal aspects relative to the student's overall growth and learning. The system adopted by the St. Bernard Parish School System meets these requirements while dealing with an individualized, continuous progress plan in the elementary schools and a high school curriculum in which each subject area has been sequentially designed into courses that include performance objectives and activities. (Author/IRT)

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Alternatives to ABC Grades

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"It is immoral to grade students who didn't have a choice in their parents, the time in history, the educational system or their teachers."
Paul Brandwein

It was recognized long ago that the letter (ABCDF) grading system was inadequate even for the traditional educational program. Many well-meaning parents and educators have refused to recognize that letter grades as such do not necessarily or accurately reflect growth. Unfortunately, parents often believe that letter grades are status symbols and motivating factors to learn. Moreover, because they are products of the system and are apprehensive of a new system, parents continue to support the letter-grade reporting process. Educators are also products of the letter-grade system and utilize it because of its administrative efficiency. Even students who have achieved academically regard letter grades as a viable goal to reach college.

In many cases letter grades have been misused as a tool to confine, control, compare, coerce, inhibit, and even to punish rather than to evaluate. Reporting of pupil progress has been a concern to educators and parents for years and has heightened during the past decade with increased emphasis on so-called innovative programs and individualized instruction.

The pro's and con's of letter grades are constantly being debated but there has been no significant departure from this system. External pressures which include any combination of administrators, parents, boards of education, and teachers are usually the obstacles that limit the development of alternative reporting procedures. In addition, by failing to take the community through the entire process of change, many over-zealous educators have become their own worst enemies through their

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inspirations "to do something" about letter grades. Such lack of planning and involvement provokes conflict and controversy which in the end, defeats their ultimate goal. Their eagerness to improve the grading process is often insensitive to the feelings and perceptions of parents, teachers, and even the board of education. In short, there is always an emotional reaction to change and consequently, without proper planning and involvement, it can destroy any meaningful alternatives to the traditional approach of grading.

The purpose of this paper is to point out that there are alternatives to the conventional grading system. Perhaps the best approach to this issue is to recognize that there must be a system of evaluation -- regardless of one's position on letter grades or viable alternatives. Instead of trying to devise, invent or develop a standard system for each school district or individual school, we must realize that there is no evaluation system which can be utilized as a standard grading system for all schools or all school districts. In essence, no one method of reporting is adequate for all because the philosophies differ from school to school and system to system.

Evaluation is the end product and should be based on the philosophy and educational program (traditional, conventional, open, continuous progress, individualized) of the school or district. With this as a fundamental tenet, each school or district can develop or design a reporting or evaluation system which it should be able to rationalize, justify and implement.

The school district I represent aspires to a continuous progress program of individualized instruction. Simply, students progress through a continuous progress curriculum complimented by a program of individualized instruction. The program includes a curriculum complete with performance objectives, activities, sources, etc., and allows students to progress at a rate and pace commensurate with their

abilities, interests, needs, disabilities, etc. The individualized instructional approach provides for constant diagnosis, prescription and evaluation and includes instructional input, discussion, and independent study.

What does this have to do with grades and the evaluation process? The answer is EVERYTHING! The evaluative system is based upon and congruent with the philosophy and design of the educational program. Student evaluation is individual and not in comparison with other students.

At the elementary level, the report card has been revised over the past eight years and provides an evaluation which includes proficiency in predetermined skills and criteria. The report also provides for evaluation of work habits and indicates selected social and personal attitudes and aspects which are observed. Another dimension of the total report is teacher comments. These remarks which can be positive or constructive are personal in nature and reflect an objective observation of individual student growth. A checklist of performance objectives completed is maintained as a record of individual progress and provides an overall assessment of the student's growth continuum through the elementary years.

The philosophy of the program continues to be reflected in the secondary schools although the method of reporting to parents differs because of the need to identify the Carnegie Unit and the need to provide a high school transcript acceptable to the State Department of Education as well as colleges and universities. In the high schools the curriculum in each subject area has been sequentially designed into courses which include the performance objectives, activities, and related sources. Each completed course is worth one-fourth of a unit of credit and students are allowed to progress through the objectives in accordance with their abilities and/or inabilities. Again, student evaluation is based on each individual's achievement and not in comparison with other students. The report form indicates

the completed course(s); an achievement grade (which is traditional in appearance) as it relates to the individual student's performance; the one-fourth unit of credit; and a corresponding comment which indicates the positive or negative aspects related to the student's progress. The grade indicates the degree of mastery each student has attained relative to the performance objectives of the course.

Reports are issued every nine weeks in order to provide parents with a periodic review of the student's progress and achievement. However, the nine week reporting process does not necessitate a time requirement. If the student is making progress but has not achieved the minimal objectives, the report simply indicates that he has not completed the performance objectives. In this regard, the student is allowed to master the objectives in the time according to his abilities and efforts. Conversely, if the student can master the course objectives in less than the nine week reporting period, the student's achievement is reported with a corresponding comment -- which is another by-product of this evaluative process. Students who waste time or put forth little or no effort are counseled and if there is continued evidence of little or no effort, the report indicates failure accordingly.

With this type of philosophy, program and evaluation process, a student is able to progress from the last point of achievement regardless of whether it is within a nine week reporting period or in a new school year. In many conventional systems, the student would fail or have to start all over even though he has mastered much of the required content and course objectives.

The best reporting procedure for any school or school district can only be determined after careful study of the needs and philosophy of the educational program. Whatever your choice may be in selecting an evaluation process, it should include these basic principles: (1) It should be focused on the individual rather than on a group; (2) It should be skill or criterion-based; (3) It should be adaptable on

a multi-grade level range; (4) It should be reasonable rather than rigid in time requirements; (5) It should identify skill proficiencies; (6) It should identify the student's skill deficiencies; (7) It should identify the student's skill position; and, (8) It should be flexible enough to provide social, behavioral and personal aspects relative to the student's overall growth and learning process.

To stress the importance of the relationship between the educational program and the reporting procedure, perhaps the simplest comparison can be made to that of a bride and groom -- the union can only be successful if both are compatible to each other.

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